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THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

WASHINGTON, THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Honorable J. Kenneth Robinson
Ranking Minority Member
Permanent Select Committee on
Intelligence
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman:

In your letter of June 7 you requested the Defense Department reaction to H.R. 2760, a bill that prohibits US support of military or paramilitary operations in Nicaragua and authorizes an overt interdiction effort in cooperation with governments in the region. Under Secretary Ikle sent you a preliminary answer on June 15. I am pleased to provide you now with a more detailed response to your questions.

Past experience tells us that the support of an insurgency movement is nearly impossible to interdict if the insurgents have the advantage of a nearby sanctuary area, protected against any and all interdiction efforts, which can be used to direct and funnel supplies over many different routes. The passage of H.R. 2760 would effectively turn Nicaragua into such a sanctuary.

Nicaragua, of course, is the pivotal link in the support system to the El Salvadoran guerrillas. Arms and supplies flow into El Salvador from Nicaragua overland through Honduras, as well as by sea and air. Nicaragua also provides extensive assistance to the insurgents in terms of training, command and control and overall guidance of the guerrilla war effort.

An interdiction program which treats Nicaragua as a sanctuary would be prohibitively expensive. For example, interdiction against ground supply flow alone could cost upwards of $300 million the first year, and at least $100 million for each subsequent year. Even at these levels, little interdiction could be achieved against air or waterborne infiltration.

Given the limited resources of friendly Central American nations, and their shortage of trained personnel, an interdiction program of this magnitude would certainly require extensive deployment of US personnel to the area. If the insurgents and their supporters in Nicaragua decide to fight the interdiction then US personnel would become the target of enemy attack. In short, the involvement of the United States in combat in Central America would likely be much greater than the sponsors of H.R. 2760 had in mind.

No referral to OSD. On-file release instructions apply.

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The report of your committee of May 13, 1983, states that the insurgency in El Salvador "depends for its lifeblood -- arms, ammunition, financing, logistics, and command-and-control facilities -- upon outside assistance from Nicaragua and Cuba." We agree with this assessment. I continue to believe, however, that this critical support to the insurgency in El Salvador cannot be curtailed through interdiction efforts that have to treat the territory of Nicaragua as a sanctuary.

Sincerely,

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